

# Drug Options - Nembutal

*I am hoping to get access to your 'peaceful pill' – not for immediate use, but to have on hand should my health deteriorate too much in the future. Arthur, 77 years*

## Introduction

The barbiturate Sodium Pentobarbital is the drug that comes closest to the concept of the Peaceful Pill. Exit defines the 'Peaceful Pill' as a pill, tablet or mixture that can be taken orally and that is guaranteed to provide a peaceful, dignified death at a time of one's choosing.

## A Short History of Barbiturates

Sodium Pentobarbital or Nembutal as it is commonly called is an important and historically significant drug. Although Nembutal is one of over 50 barbiturate derivatives to have been used medically, it is the drug of choice when it comes to dignified, peaceful dying.

All Barbiturates are derivatives of barbituric acid which was first synthesized by Adolph von Bayer in 1864. A 'condensation' of malonic acid and urea, barbituric acid is said to have acquired its name after St Barbara's Day (4 December) - the day on which it is believed to have been discovered.

## Nembutal



**TOPS IN TASTE, COLOR APPEAL AND MISCIBILITY**

*New improved*  
**NEMBUTAL® Elixir**  
 (PENTOBARBITAL, ABBOTT)

Compare with the old, and with the new—and the new in this case is an attractively colored, better-tasting NEMBUTAL Elixir. It's much less viscous than the old product, too, and is readily miscible with other medication.

**SWEETENED** to a large extent with SUCARYL® Sodium, Abbott's non-caloric, heat-stable sweetening agent, the new NEMBUTAL Elixir is a decided improvement over the old, which was a good product in itself and a leader in its field for 15 years. The new Elixir is not delicious, of course, but considering that it contains a barbiturate, it is palatable. Adults and children can take it straight without any difficulty. When diluted with water or fruit juices, its taste is hardly noticeable.

**ONE TEASPOONFUL** (1 fl.oz.) represents 15 mg. (1/4 gr.) of short-acting NEMBUTAL. So, in equal oral doses, no other barbiturate combines *quicker, longer, more profound effect*.

**COMPATIBILITY** of the new Elixir is superior to the old. It can be mixed with vitamin complex elixir or syrup, aluminum hydroxide gel, belladonna tincture, codeine sulfate, Disoxyn® Elixir, epinephrine hydrochloride or sulfate, hyoscyamine tincture, Milk of Trinitrum®, potassium iodide, sodium salicylate, Vi-Dalvin® and many other types of medication. It can be given with infant's formula or whole milk and will withstand heating. Pharmacies everywhere have the new NEMBUTAL Elixir in 1-pint shelf-saving and 1-gallon bottles.

**FOR A GENEROUS SAMPLE**  
 of the new better-tasting NEMBUTAL Elixir, take a moment to fill in the enclosed business reply card.

Fig 16.1 Nembutal women's magazine advertisement from 1950's

Other historians have speculated that the discovery may have been named after the chemist's favourite barmaid, Barbara. Either way, the name stuck and barbituric acid has enjoyed an infamous history ever since (Mendelson, 1980). Barbituric acid was found to have no physiological effect and it took another 40 years before chemists, Emil Fischer and Joseph von Mering, discovered that the introduction of two additional side-arms onto the molecule produced a range of compounds with marked physiological activity. It was only then that it became known that the nature of the sedative, hypnotic, or anaesthetic properties of the substance were determined by the characteristics of the side-arms attached.

The first of these di-substituted barbiturates was Veronal. Here two ethyl side-arms were added to produce diethyl-barbituric acid a weak hypnotic/ depressant which was marketed by the Bayer company as 'Veronal' in 1904. This was followed by phenobarbital (Luminal) in 1913. While barbituric acid is a German discovery, during the First World War when German shipping was blockaded, American chemists made use of the 'Trading with the Enemy Act,' to copy the work of the Germans and manufacture their own modifications of barbituric acid.

## **Barbiturate Sleeping Pills**

In the first half of the 20th Century, barbiturates were manufactured around the world, with production peaking in the 1950s. By then there were more than 20 marketed forms of barbiturates, with most sold as sleeping tablets.

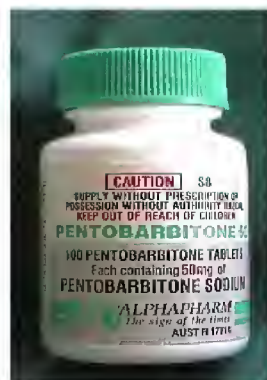


Fig 16.2: Pentobarbital  
(Nembutal) sleeping tablets

Along with the original Veronal, there was Barbital, Amytal, Seconal, Soneryl, Nembutal and several others.

While these barbiturates were highly effective sleeping tablets, a significant problem was the very serious side-effect associated with their overdose - death. This was found to be especially true if the pills were taken with alcohol. Many famous people have died - some deliberately, some inadvertently - from an overdose of barbiturates. Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland and Jimmy Hendrix are a few.

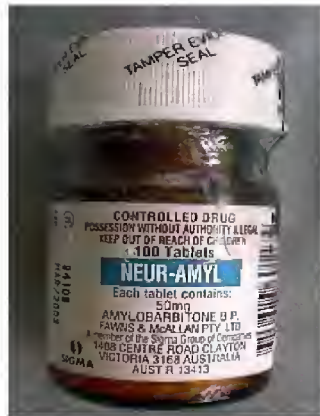


Fig 16.3: Amylobarbitone (Amytal) sleeping tablets

## **Barbiturates as Drugs of Abuse**

In the 1960s, the image of barbiturates suffered further when they were found to be useful mood-altering drugs. At this time, the depressant effect of the drugs was exploited. By carefully adjusting the dose, a desirable soporific and tranquil state could be achieved and they became known as ‘downers.’ As downers, barbiturates would often be intermixed with ‘uppers’ - drugs like amphetamines. This type of usage led to a set of slang street terms for these drugs such as ‘Pink Ladies’, ‘Yellow Bullets’, ‘Peanuts’ and ‘Dolls’ (from Barbie dolls) (Mendelson, 1980).

With only a small margin of safety in dose between the desired sleep, euphoria and death, there was considerable danger associated with the prescription of these drugs. History shows they fell out of favour with the medical profession once newer, safer sleeping tablets became available.

### **The Advent of Non-barbiturate Sleeping Pills**

The first of the new class of sleeping drugs (the benzodiazepines) was diazepam (Valium), which became available in the early 1960s. These drugs were welcomed by the medical profession as a safe alternative to the barbiturate sleeping tablets. At this time there were many prescribed forms of barbiturates on the market but with the introduction of these new benzodiazepines, the use of the barbiturates steadily declined.

By the mid 1990s, there was only a handful of barbiturate sleeping tablets left; amylobarbitol (Amytal) and pentobarbitol (Nembutal). Nembutal was withdrawn with little notice in 1998 with Amytal following suit in 2003. Today, the only barbiturate commonly prescribed by doctors is the slow-acting Phenobarbitol. This drug still finds a niche in medicine as an anti-convulsant, but is a poor substitute to the specific barbiturate sleeping tablets in providing a reliable, peaceful death.

### **Barbiturate Use in Veterinary Practice**

The veterinary use of the barbiturates has persisted. Nembutal, in particular, is used as an agent for euthanasia. A large dose delivered intravenously, quickly and peacefully ends an animal's life. This green-dyed form of the drug, known as Lethabarb or Valabarb, is also known as 'the green dream.'

A sterile form of Nembutal has also persisted as a useful complete anaesthetic agent that can quickly render an animal unconscious for surgery. Pentobarbital continues to play a role in veterinary practice to this day even though its use by the medical profession has all but disappeared. A development that has led to a resurrection of these outdated drugs is their increasing use as the drugs of choice for voluntary euthanasia (and state-sanctioned executions in some states of the US).

### **Nembutal in Countries where Assisted Dying is Legal**

Nembutal is the drug of choice in countries where VE and Assisted Suicide are legal and is used in The Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and the various US states.

When the *Rights of the Terminally Ill Act* was passed in the Northern Territory, I had the challenge of deciding which drug or substance would produce the most humane, peaceful reliable death.



Fig 16.4: The 'Deliverance' euthanasia machine

After much research and consultation - a process that even saw us seeking information about the drugs used for execution in the US - a decision was made to sanction the use of a large intravenous or oral dose of Nembutal.

## *Nembutal*

The four people who died using the *ROTI Act* all injected themselves with Nembutal (with the help of the Deliverance Machine, now on display in the British Science Museum).

See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Euthanasia\\_machine\\_\(Australia\).JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Euthanasia_machine_(Australia).JPG)

While these people could also have simply drunk the liquid Nembutal, each preferred intravenous administration. When delivered in this way, loss of consciousness is almost immediate (seconds), with death following a short time later.

Drinking Nembutal is often the preferred option and means no other person need be involved in administration. For example, in the state of Oregon in the US, a doctor is only allowed to *prescribe* as opposed to *administer* a 10 gm oral dose of barbiturates to a patient. The patient must drink the drug themselves. In Switzerland, too, it is the client who must administer the drug him/her self. In Holland and Belgium, it is lawful to provide barbiturates as an injection to a dying patient. The drug used in each these places is Nembutal.



Fig 16.5:  
Sterile veterinary  
Nembutal



## **How Barbiturates Work**

Barbiturates effect the action of the brain chemical GABA in that they enhance the effect of GABA on the brain, and may even act in its place. GABA slows the activity of the brain. Enhancing its action causes sedation and sleep. In larger doses, the barbiturate may even replace the GABA in the brain. An overdose of a barbiturate can depress brain function so severely that respiration ceases and the person dies.

As discussed above, the depressant effect of barbiturates can be useful in counteracting the irritability and paranoia that can result from the use of amphetamines. Barbiturates have also been reported to be effective in alleviating the symptoms of heroin withdrawal. In the 1960s, injecting drug users were reported to have substituted barbiturates for opiates like heroin and methadone if such drugs were not available.

## **Available Forms of Nembutal**

For human use, Nembutal was extensively marketed as sleeping tablets or capsules in the 1950s & 1960s. Even though Nembutal disappeared off the market over a decade ago, many people have old stocks which are still potent. One hundred of these capsules (100 x 100mg = 10gm of barbiturate) is a lethal dose.

Barbiturates are also well absorbed rectally and some countries have marketed forms of suppositories. ‘Nova Rectal’ in Canada is one such example. Sterile ampoules of injectable Nembutal for intramuscular and intravenous administration as a hypnotic, anti-convulsant and pre-operative sedative still find a small place in medicine in some countries including the US.



## *Nembutal*

The veterinary forms of the drug are also still used in either the sterile injectable form for anaesthesia, or a non-sterile form (Valabarb or Lethabarb) for animal euthanasia.

The sterile form of this veterinary barbiturate is marketed in small, sealed 100ml bottles that are protected with a metal seal. This metal cap makes tampering obvious. The Nembutal inside is a clear liquid with concentration of 60 mg/ml. Each 100ml bottle has a total of 6 gm of Nembutal - enough to provide a peaceful death.



Non-sterile coloured  
veterinary Nembutal (Lethabarb)

Non-sterile Nembutal liquid ('Lethabarb') is used for animal euthanasia, is colour dyed for safety, and has a much higher concentration of barbiturate (300mg/ml). 30ml taken orally is lethal.

NOTE: Both these forms of the drug display labelling - '*For Animal Use ONLY*' and '*For Injection ONLY*'. But the Nembutal liquid is lethal when taken orally by humans.

## **Pentobarb & Phenobarb – Confusing Names**

Nembutal is the commercial or trade name for the barbiturate whose chemical name is pentobarbital ('pent-o-barb-it-al'). This drug is different to another barbiturate called phenobarbital. Phenobarbital is a slow-acting drug, used predominantly as an anti-convulsant to stabilise people suffering from epilepsy.

While phenobarb can be lethal in overdose, it has a much slower action than Nembutal and is not an ideal method for self-deliverance. These two barbiturates should not be confused.

## **Sources of Nembutal**

In most western countries there are now no medically prescribed barbiturate sleeping tablets. What remains in the public consciousness, however, is the belief that an overdose of sleeping tablets - any sleeping tablet – will cause death. This misconception leads to many failed suicide attempts as elderly or seriously ill people often stockpile, then take, large numbers of modern, non-lethal sleeping tablets.

Let us be clear. There is *no point* in asking your doctor for sleeping tablets if you plan to end your life. Tablets obtained this way *will not* be barbiturates and the drugs obtained will be unlikely, even in significant overdose, to cause death.

The commonest source of life-ending barbiturates in most western countries is the veterinary profession, and even this supply is likely to diminish in time. There is no legitimate or plausible reason for a vet to provide this drug to any member of the public. You can hardly tell your vet that you're planning to operate on the cat this weekend!

## **Nembutal and Veterinarians**

Veterinary Nembutal has been used by vets to euthanase animals or as an anaesthetic in surgery for many decades. Before 1998, when Nembutal was still being prescribed by doctors, it may just have been possible to argue that your insomnia was so



Fig 16.7: Non-sterile veterinary

bad that only the rare and dangerous Nembutal could help you get a good night's sleep. But there is simply no excuse one can give a vet to obtain this drug!

If a vet were ever to provide Nembutal - knowing what the person has in mind - they could face a charge of assisting a suicide. De-registration and a prison term would be the likely consequence. In 2001 the Australian

Veterinary Board became concerned about the increasing use of veterinary Nembutal as a human euthanasia option and put out a warning to its members urging caution in the storage and use of the drug. (see *Veterinary Surgeons Board*, 2003).

Exit knows of only a handful of cases where seriously ill people have been able to obtain Nembutal from their Vet. When there is public mention of this possibility, the Veterinary Associations have reacted quickly denying the practice.

Moves to further restrict the use of veterinary Nembutal has meant that the anaesthetic form of the drug (see Fig 16.5) is becoming more difficult to obtain. This is the form of the drug favoured by those wanting it for their own use, comforted by the fact that it comes in a clearly-labelled sterile sealed bottles.

The non-sterile green dyed form is more concentrated than its clear counterpart. Marketed as Valabarb (Fig 16.7) or Lethabarb (Fig 16.6) the concentration of this type of pentobarbital is 300mg/ml (five times higher than in the sterile anaesthetic form). A single 30ml sample will contain 10gm of Nembutal and be lethal. This non-sterile green liquid needs to be decanted from

a larger 500ml bottle. If drunk it can stain the lips and tongue. With such staining it is unlikely that an attending doctor will cite natural causes on the death certificate.

### **A Case Study in Nembutal**

When asked about Nembutal at Exit workshops, I tell people that it can be very handy to know a vet. Some time ago, I was making a clinic visit to the bedside of Harry, a dying patient. With his wife at his side Harry asked me about ‘the best drugs’, the ones that would let him peacefully end his own life.

I explained that the ‘best’ drug was Nembutal, but that this was only available from a vet. ‘How many vets do you know really well’ I asked, ‘ones that will risk jail helping you?’ His silence answered my question, and we went on to talk about other more easily available, but less effective, drugs.

After the visit, I left the bedroom and had a cup of tea in the kitchen with Harry’s wife, Esme. Tentatively she said, ‘you know when you asked about knowing a vet?’ I looked at her, confused. She went on ‘well, I knew a vet, very well indeed.’ I waited, not knowing what was to follow. She continued. ‘In fact, some time back I had an affair with a vet. My husband knows nothing about it, and I want to keep it that way. But that vet owes me some bloody big favours and I’m going to call them in!’

A few weeks later, Harry died of his disease. I heard that Esme did indeed call in the favour, obtaining the 100ml bottle of liquid Nembutal. She told me that the bottle sat in the bedroom with Harry during his last weeks and that he drew immense comfort from knowing it was there. As he faced every new day, he was

reassured by the knowledge that if the day became too difficult, he could leave at any time. Indeed, the presence of the drug prolonged Harry's life.

The number of people who have a vet as their best friend, a friend prepared to risk jail for them is very small. There has only been a handful of occasions when I have seen help provided in this way, and Harry's was one of them. Perhaps the question put to patients should be rephrased, perhaps I should be asking 'have you ever had an affair with a vet?' When I told this story at a recent public meeting, one elderly woman shouted back 'I wish you'd told me that 40 years ago.'

## **Nembutal and the Black Market**

Exit receives occasional reports of people paying a very high price on the black market for Nembutal. Desperate for the drug, some have paid over \$5000 for a single 100ml bottle of veterinary Nembutal. This same bottle would retail to a vet for less than \$50. Despite the huge potential profit to a dealer, Nembutal is rarely found this way. The usual laws of supply and demand that govern the illegal drug trade do not apply, as no one will ever want more than one bottle of this drug. Supply chains do not therefore develop.

The Nembutal that does find its way on to the street is usually in the form of the sterile veterinary liquid. It is presumed that it is obtained when veterinary clinics are broken into by people looking for tradeable veterinary steroids.

If the seal and labelling of a Nembutal bottle is intact and the expiry date not exceeded, the drug is likely to be effective.

Nevertheless, one is advised to test the substance if planning to use such sources. The Exit barbiturate test kit is available at: <http://www.exitinternationalstore.com>

The Exit Test Kit enables people who have acquired liquid Nembutal to self-test the drug.

**Note:** The 'Exit Spot Test Kit' provides qualitative evidence of the presence of the drug. The Max Bromson Quantitative Test Kit provides a test for purity (eg. drug concentration and strength) .

### **The Shelf Life of Liquid Nembutal**

Event though most liquid Nembutal will have an expiry date of around two years, this is one substance that is known to remain effective for much longer. If stored in a cool place and kept in its sterile, sealed bottle, liquid Nembutal can be expected to have a shelf-life of many years.

A detailed discussion of the shelf life of both liquid and powdered Nembutal can be found in the following Chapters.

### **Nembutal - Summary**

The barbiturate pentobarbital (Nembutal) is the best euthanasia drug and comes closest to the concept of the Peaceful Pill. In countries and states where it is lawful to help someone to die and any drug or substance could be used, the choice is always Nembutal.

Yet Nembutal is a hard drug to obtain with doctors in most western countries no longer able/ willing to prescribe the drug. Nembutal's restricted use by vets makes it increasingly difficult to access.

However, Nembutal can be obtained from overseas, in South America, SE Asia, and in powdered form from China. The next chapter gives a detailed outline of where to go and how to buy Nembutal. This information changes frequently and is regularly updated for *The Peaceful Pill eHandbook*.

### **Legal comment**

In Australia, Pentobarbital (Nembutal) is a border-controlled drug. When imported in a quantity less than 50 grams the maximum penalty is up to 10 years imprisonment and/ or a fine of \$360,000. These penalties can increase right up to life imprisonment and/ or \$1,350,000 for higher commercial quantities. In reality, those who have imported this drug into Australia for possible personal use, for example, have received a fine of a few hundred dollars and no criminal conviction.

In the UK, pentobarbital is a Class B drug. Unlawful importation brings a maximum penalty of 14 years and an unlimited fine limit.

In the US, Pentobarbital is a Schedule II controlled substance for which the maximum penalties are up to 20 years imprisonment and a one million dollar fine.



## **The RP Test for Nembutal**

Nembutal is the ‘gold standard’ of the euthanasia drugs, a reputation derived from the peaceful and reliable death this drug provides. The drug can be difficult to access, and loses some points because of this, but with an overall rating on 88% it is easily the best end of life option available.

### **Exit RP Test - Nembutal**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Score</b>
<i>Reliability</i>	<i>10/10</i>
<i>Peacefulness</i>	<i>10/10</i>
<i>Availability</i>	<i>2/5</i>
<i>Preparation</i>	<i>5/5</i>
<i>Undetectability</i>	<i>4/5</i>
<i>Speed</i>	<i>4/5</i>
<i>Safety</i>	<i>5/5</i>
<i>Storage</i>	<i>4/5</i>
<b>Total Score</b>	<b>44 (88%)</b>